

List of Drugs (*materia medica*)

Pharmacy was the most popular of all branches of the healing art, according to the Genizah manuscripts. Goitein explains the phenomena not as the continuation of the pre-Islamic tradition, but as a law of economic history, still in effect today, that minority groups have a chance of being successful in occupations not yet monopolized by the more privileged classes of the society. The pharmacists were trained to collect and preserve the various medicaments brought from near or far-off lands.

Sources for the study of a medieval practical pharmacy are extremely rare since all records of practical medicine naturally vanish over the years. Practical medical and pharmacological knowledge can be extracted from lists of *materia medica*, prescriptions and medical letters. Authentic lists of *materia medica* that were found in the Genizah enable us to understand medieval practical pharmacy and to reconstruct their inventories; such lists may be of various origins: inventories of pharmacies compiled for establishing or dissolving partnerships, for commercial orders, or for tax purposes; pharmacists' invoices and order forms for substances, especially those of wholesalers sent to retailers, or of pharmacists sent to wholesalers.



Image 1 – List of drugs and their quantities, written in Judaeo-Arabic (T-S Ar.30.274).



The drugs listed are known from other sources, but in this case all were carried at the same time by one retailer; the fragments mention weights and prices as well. In general, the 70 original *materia medica* lists found in the Genizah lack any headings that might explain their uses.

Two hundred and six drugs are mentioned in the lists of *materia medica*, of which 167 are of plant origin, 16 are of animal origin, and the remaining 23 are inorganic. This can be explained by Egypt's being an important producer of such materials (borax, alum) as well as an entrepot for such substances (copper, iron, lead, mercury, earth, silver). The most frequently mentioned plants, and therefore, we suggest, most frequently used were: myrobalan, pepper and saffron.

Lists of *materia medica* point directly to the existing trade in these drugs and the place they occupied on the shelves of the pharmacies that could be found in the lanes and alleys of the Jewish quarter of Cairo.

The large number of lists written in Arabic might be considered as evidence that Arabic was the daily and commercial language of pharmacists and other members of the Jewish community of Medieval Cairo. None of the lists is written in Hebrew.

Image 2 – List of drugs and their quantities, written in Arabic (T-S Ar.39.487)